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Title:

Comments: To Forest Supervisor Rodney Smolden and Regional Forester Jim Pena,

On August 8th, 2015, a friend and I started a hike that would take us the entire length of the Kettle Crest Trail in a single day (<http://tinyurl.com/cake-walk-kettle-crest>). During this hike my concept of what wilderness could be changed. Wilderness isn't just soaring alpine mountains, but should be any area that remains untouched by humankind. The Columbia Highlands is one of the most wild areas of Washington State and deserves commensurate legal protection. I write in support of Alternative B to protect as much of the Columbia Highlands as possible for future generations.

I am shocked that the USFS preferred alternative only recommends 6% additional wilderness within this area. Not even 3% of the Colville Nat'l Forest is currently designated wilderness which is far below the national average of 19%. Alternative B provides a comprehensive amount of protection that ensures the wild areas remain so forever. Designations such as "Special Interest Area" lack the Congressionally mandated protection that official wilderness provides.

The USFS plan also fails to mention winter use of the Colville National Forest. Motorized use should be limited to areas where motorized use is allowed in the summer. Additional wilderness designation would provide for non-mechanized use by snowshoers and backcountry skiers who seek solitude during the quietest time of the year.

Almost all areas in Alternative B lack substantive and unresolvable concern or conflict with regard to wilderness designation. In fact, the Northeast Washington Forestry Coalition's recommendation is very similar to Alternative B. Despite what input you may receive from other non-motorized recreation users, nobody has ever lost access to their favorite trail due to wilderness designation. Other users may raise concerns about trail maintenance. In fact, maintenance via non-mechanized means becomes more sensible and cost-effective the farther you get from a trailhead. Without gas to carry or parts to break, crosscut saws and other hand tools do the job - all while minimally disturbing wildlife.

The local (and national) economic benefits of wilderness are well established. The Pacific Northwest Scenic Trail runs through several areas that should be designated wilderness and such a designation would increase the attractiveness of through-hiking the PNT. Hikers are drawn to wilderness areas and bring economic benefit as a result.

The Colville National Forest's own Forest Planning Summit ending in 2007 found strong support among stakeholders for retaining the wilderness quality of these areas. Notable is the relative absence of conflict with regard to timber management, which historically has been among the most challenging issues related to wilderness.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide support for expanded wilderness designation within the Colville National Forest.

Sincerely,
Luke Bakken